

Understanding Virtual Comparison Groups

What is a VCG?

A virtual comparison group is a group of students, not restricted by physical boundaries, that matches key school district, school and student characteristics to the student who is being compared.

Why use a VCG?

Typical comparisons match a student to a group of students that could vary considerably. Therefore, the comparison is only meaningful to the extent in which those students match. For example, if the comparison group were the student's class, then the comparison would only be useful in identifying how well the student was doing in relation to his or her classmates. If the student were only starting to learn English, this comparison would provide little insight.

A virtual comparison group is not limited by physical constraints. Therefore, we can find a virtual "class" of students matching, characteristic for characteristic, the student being examined. For example, we might compare our English-learner student to other English-learner students in the same grade, who are also in rural schools where between 55 and 60 per cent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and who began the school year at the same instructional level. When we compare our student to this group, the results are more meaningful because we have isolated many of the variables.

How are VCGs created?

The Growth Research Database, a large repository of student academic achievement information using NWEA test results, is the basis for developing VCGs. The district, school and student characteristics of each student in the study group is identified and then used to match to all other students having the same characteristics.

Once all the matching students have been identified (VCG qualified candidates), a random sample of 51 students is drawn to form the final VCG for each student. If fewer than 51 students are identified in the initial VCG candidate group, the free and reduced lunch percent, the initial RIT score and/or the fall testing time criteria are slightly relaxed until there are at least 51 students in the VCG qualified group.

What is a "like" student?

Students in the virtual comparison group match the student being studied in three areas:

1. General filters

- a. Only students who have valid test scores are considered
- b. Only students who have both a fall and spring RIT score for the year and subject area in study are considered

2. School filters

- a. The percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch is within 5 percentage points of the school being studied
- b. Schools with the same urban/rural classification (based on the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data Survey) are considered (The urban/rural categories 1 through 4 are considered urban and 5 through 8 are considered rural.)

3. Student filters

- a. Students are in the same grade level
- b. Students beginning (fall) RIT scores in the subject area are within 2 RIT points of the student being studied
- c. Student beginning (fall) RIT scores are within plus or minus 7 days of the student being studied